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## THE PRESIDENT, AT NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, MAY 15, 1916.

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MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN OF THE PRESS CLUB:

I am both glad and sorry to be here; glad because I am always happy to be with you, and know and like so many of you, and sorry because I have to make a speech. One of the leading faults of you gentlemen of the press is your inordinate desire to hear other men talk, to draw them out upon all occasions, whether they wish to be drawn out or not. I remember being in this Press Club once before, making many unpremeditated disclosures of myself, and then having you with your singular instinct for publicity insist that I should give it away to everybody else.

I was thinking as I was looking forward to coming here this evening of that other occasion when I stood very nearly at the threshold of the duties that I have since been called upon to perform, and I was going over in my mind the impressions that I then had by way of forecast of the duties of President and comparing them with the experiences that have followed. I must say that the forecast has been very largely verified, and that the impressions I had then have been deepened rather than weakened.

You may recall that I said then that I felt constantly a personal detachment from the Presidency; that one thing that I resented when I was not performing the duties of the office was being reminded that I was the President of the United States. I felt toward it as a man feels toward a great function which, in working hours, he is obliged to perform, but which, out of working hours, he is glad to get away from and almost forget and resume the quiet course of his own thoughts. I am constantly reminded as I go about, as I do sometimes at the week end, of the personal inconvenience of being President of the United States. If I want to know how many people live in a small town all I have to do is to go there and they at once line up to be counted. I might, in a census-taking year, save the census takers a great deal of trouble by asking them to accompany me and count the people on the spot. Sometimes, when I am

most beset, I seriously think of renting a pair of whiskers or of doing something else that will furnish me with an adequate disguise, because I am sorry to find that the cut of my jib is unmistakable and that I must sail under false colors if I am going to sail incognito.

Yet as I have matched my experiences with my anticipations, I, of course, have been aware that I was taken by surprise because of the prominence of many things to which I had not looked forward. When we are dealing with domestic affairs, gentlemen, we are dealing with things that to us as Americans are more or less calculable. There is a singular variety among our citizenship, it is true, a greater variety even than I had anticipated; but, after all, we are all steeped in the same atmosphere, we are all surrounded by the same environment, we are all more or less affected by the same traditions, and, moreover, we are working out something that has to be worked out among ourselves, and the elements are there to be dealt with at first hand. But when the fortunes of your own country are, so to say, subject to the incalculable winds of passion that are blowing through other parts of the world, then the strain is of a singular and unprecedented kind, because you do not know by what turn of the wheel of fortune the control of things is going to be taken out of your hand; it makes no difference how deep the passion of the Nation lies, that passion may be so overborne by the rush of fortune in circumstances like those which now exist that you feel the sort of—I had almost said resentment that a man feels when his own affairs are not within his own hands. You can imagine the strain upon the feeling of any man who is trying to interpret the spirit of his country when he feels that that spirit can not have its own way beyond a certain point. And one of the greatest points of strain upon me, if I may be permitted to point it out, was this:

There are two reasons why the chief wish of America is for peace. One is that they love peace and have nothing to do with the present quarrel; and the other is that they believe the present quarrel has carried those engaged in it so far that they can not be held to ordinary standards of responsibility, and that, therefore, as some men have expressed it to me, since the rest of the world is mad, why should we not simply refuse to have anything to do with the rest of the world in the ordinary channels of action? Why not let the

storm pass, and then, when it is all over, have the reckonings? Knowing that from both these two points of view the passion of America was for peace, I was, nevertheless, aware that America is one of the Nations of the world, not only, but one of the chief Nations of the world—a Nation that grows more and more powerful almost in spite of herself: that grows morally more and more influential even when she is not aware of it; and that if she is to play the part which she most covets, it is necessary that she should act more or less from the point of view of the rest of the world. If I can not retain my moral influence over a man except by occasionally knocking him down, if that is the only basis upon which he will respect me, then for the sake of his soul I have got occasionally to knock him down. You know how we have read in—isn't it in Ralph Connor's stories of western life in Canada?—that all his sky pilots are ready for a fracas at any time, and how the ultimate salvation of the souls of their parishioners depends upon their using their fists occasionally. If a man will not listen to you quietly in a seat, sit on his neck and make him listen; just as I have always maintained, particularly in view of certain experiences of mine, that the shortest road to a boy's moral sense is through his cuticle. There is a direct and, if I may be permitted the pun, a fundamental connection between the surface of his skin and his moral consciousness. You arrest his attention first in that way, and then get the moral lesson conveyed to him in milder ways that, if he were grown up, would be the only ways you would use.

So I say that I have been aware that in order to do the very thing that we are proudest of the ability to do, there might come a time when we would have to do it in a way that we would prefer not to do it; and the great burden on my spirits, gentlemen, has been that it has been up to me to choose when that time came. Can you imagine a thing more calculated to keep a man awake at nights than that? Because, just because I did not feel that I was the whole thing and was aware that my duty was a duty of interpretation, how could I be sure that I had the right elements of information by which to interpret truly?

What we are now talking about is largely spiritual. You say, "All the people out my way think so and so." Now, I know perfectly well that you have not talked with all the people out your



way. I find that out again and again. And so you are taken by surprise. The people of the United States are not asking anybody's leave to do their own thinking, and are not asking anybody to tip them off what they ought to think. They are thinking for themselves, every man for himself; and you do not know, and, the worst of it is, since the responsibility is mine, I do not know what they are thinking about. I have the most imperfect means of finding out, and yet I have got to act as if I knew. That is the burden of it, and I tell you, gentlemen, it is a pretty serious burden, particularly if you look upon the office as I do—that I am not put here to do what I please. If I were, it would have been very much more interesting than it has been. I am put here to interpret, to register, to suggest, and, more than that, and much greater than that, to be suggested to.

Now, that is where the experience that I forecast has differed from the experience that I have had. In domestic matters I think I can in most cases come pretty near a guess where the thought of America is going, but in foreign affairs the chief element is where action is going on in other quarters of the world and not where thought is going in the United States. Therefore, I have several times taken the liberty of urging upon you gentlemen not yourselves to know more than the State Department knows about foreign affairs. Some of you have shown a singular range of omniscience, and certain things have been reported as understood in administrative circles which I never heard of until I read the newspapers. I am constantly taken by surprise in regard to decisions which are said to be my own, and this gives me an uncomfortable feeling that some providence is at work with which I have had no communication at all. Now, that is pretty dangerous, gentlemen, because it happens that remarks start fires. There is tinder lying everywhere, not only on the other side of the water, but on this side of the water. and a man that spreads sparks may be responsible for something a great deal worse than burning a town on the Mexican border. Thoughts may be bandits. Thoughts may be raiders. Thoughts may be invaders. Thoughts may be disturbers of international peace; and when you reflect upon the importance of this country keeping out of the present war, you will know what tremendous elements we are all dealing with. We are all in the same boat. If somebody does not keep the processes of peace going, if somebody does not keep their passions disengaged,

by what impartial judgment and suggestion is the world to be aided to a solution when the whole thing is over? If you are in a conference in which you know nobody is disinterested, how are you going to make a plan? I tell you this gentlemen, the only thing that saves the world is the little handful of disinterested men that are in it.

Now, I have found a few disinterested men. I wish I had found more. I can name two or three men with whom I have conferred again and again and again, and I have never caught them by an inadvertance thinking about themselves for their own interests, and I tie to those men as you would tie to an anchor. I tie to them as you would tie to the voices of conscience if you could be sure that you always heard them. Men who have no axes to grind! Men who love America so that they would give their lives for it and never care whether anybody heard that they had given their lives for it; willing to die in obscurity if only they might serve! Those are the men, and nations like those men are the nations that are going to serve the world and save it. There never was a time in the history of the world when character, just sheer character all by itself, told more than it does now. A friend of mine says that every man who takes office in Washington either grows or swells, and when I give a man an office, I watch him carefully to see whether he is swelling or growing. The mischief of it is that when they swell they do not swell enough to burst. If they would only swell to the point where you might insert a pin and let the gases out, it would be a great delight. I do not know any pastime that would be more diverting, except that the gases are probably poisonous so that we would have to stand from under. But the men who grow, the men who think better a year after they are put in office than they thought when they were put in office, are the balance wheel of the whole thing. They are the ballast that enables the craft to carry sail and to make port in the long run, no matter what the weather is.

So I have come willing to make this narrative of experience to you. I have come through the fire since I talked to you last. Whether the metal is purer than it was, God only knows; but the fire has been there, the fire has penetrated every part of it, and if I may believe my own thoughts I have less partisan feeling, more impatience of party maneuver, more enthusiasm for the right thing, no matter whom it

hurts, than I ever had before in my life. And I have something that it is no doubt dangerous to have, but that I can not help having. I have a profound intellectual contempt for men who can not see the signs of the times. I have to deal with some men who know no more of the modern processes of politics than if they were living in the eighteenth century, and for them I have a profound and comprehensive intellectual contempt. They are blind. They are hopelessly blind; and the worst of it is I have to spend hours of my time talking to them when I know before I start as much as after I have finished that it is absolutely useless to talk to them. I am talking *in vacuo*.

The business of every one of us, gentlemen, is to realize that if we are correspondents of papers who have not yet heard of modern times we ought to send them as many intimations of modern movements as they are willing to print. There is a simile that was used by a very interesting English writer that has been much in my mind. Like myself, he had often been urged not to try to change so many things. I remember when I was president of a university a man said to me, "Good heavens, man, why don't you leave something alone and let it stay the way it is?" And I said, "If you will guarantee to me that it will stay the way it is I will let it alone; but if you knew anything you would know that if you leave a live thing alone it will not stay where it is. It will develop and will either go in the wrong direction or decay." I reminded him of this thing that the English writer said, that if you want to keep a white post white you can not let it alone. It will get black. You have to keep doing something to it. In that instance you have got to keep painting it white, and you have got to paint it white very frequently in order to keep it white, because there are forces at work that will get the better of you. Not only will it turn black, but the forces of moisture and the other forces of nature will penetrate the white paint and get at the fiber of the wood, and decay will set in, and the next time you try to paint it you will find that there is nothing but punk to paint. Then you will remember the Red Queen in "Alice in Wonderland," or "Alice Through the Looking Glass"—I forget which, it has been so long since I read them—who takes Alice by the hand and they rush along at a great pace, and then when they stop Alice looks around and says, "But we are just where



we were when we started." "Yes," says the Red Queen, "you have to run twice as fast as that to get anywhere else."

That is also true, gentlemen, of the world and of affairs. You have got to run fast merely to stay where you are, and in order to get anywhere, you have got to run twice as fast as that. That is what people do not realize. That is the mischief of these hopeless dams against the stream known as reactionaries and standpatters, and other words of obloquy. That is what is the matter with them; they are not even staying where they were. They are sinking further and further back in what will sometime comfortably close over their heads as the black waters of oblivion. I sometimes imagine that I see their heads going down, and I am not inclined even to throw them a life preserver. The sooner they disappear, the better. We need their places for people who are awake; and we particularly need now, gentlemen, men who will divest themselves of party passion and of personal preference and will try to think in the terms of America. If a man describes himself to me now in any other terms than those terms, I am not sure of him; and I love the fellows that come into my office sometimes and say, "Mr. President, I am an American." Their hearts are right, their instinct true, they are going in the right direction, and will take the right leadership if they believe that the leader is also a man who thinks first of America.

You will see, gentlemen, that I did not premeditate these remarks, or they would have had some connection with each other. They would have had some plan. I have merely given myself the pleasure of telling you what has really been in my heart, and not only has been in my heart but is in my heart every day of the week. If I did not go off at week ends occasionally and throw off, as much as it is possible to throw off, this burden, I could not stand it. This week I went down the Potomac and up the James and substituted history for politics, and there was an infinite, sweet calm in some of those old places that reminded me of the records that were made in the days that are past; and I comforted myself with the recollection that the men we remember are the disinterested men who gave us the deeds that have covered the name of America all over with the luster of imperishable glory.

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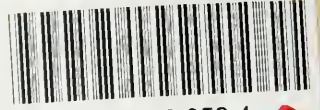
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